

*The ‘View of Macau’ by Gaspard Duché de Vanchy in the
Atlas of La Pérouse voyage around the world (1787)*

Ivo Carneiro de Sousa, East-West Institute for Advanced Studies

Jean-François Galaup de La Pérouse is one of the best well-known 18th century European grand oceanic navigators. Unfortunately, famous due to the most tragic, unhappy end: he mysteriously disappeared in mid-1788, not far from the Salomon Islands, in the South Pacific, during his most famous maritime world voyage. It took decades to find out the tragic destiny of *la Boussole* and *l’Astrolabe*, the expedition’s two ships that shipwrecked in Vanikoro reefs probably due to a significant storm taking with it a crew of more than two hundred people, including an impressive set of leading French scientists. Born in Alby in 1741, La Pérouse entered at the early age of 15 in Brest naval school after studying in his childhood at a Jesuit college. Following intense formation and several maritime expeditions, he participated in 1781 in the naval combats of the independence war of the United States, victoriously leading the frigate *Astrée* during the battle of Louisbourg. Promoted to Commodore, he was commissioned in 1785 by King Louis XVI and the Minister of the Navy, the Marquis Charles Eugène Gabriel de La Croix de Castries (1743-1801), to lead a new scientific expedition around the world. The mission mainly aimed to explore Australia and the Pacific Islands, a distant stage of much more diverse Franco-British rivalry to control new territorial and scientific “discoveries”.¹

In his last known letter sent in March 1788 from Botany Bay in Sydney, La Pérouse wrote that he expected to be back in France by June 1789, but he would never return. Luckily, his detailed journals of the different stages of the trip, plus many maps, drawings, several reports, and abundant official and private correspondence survived, were sent regularly to

¹West-Sooby, John (ed.). 2013. *Discovery and Empire the French in the South Seas*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.

France from regular voyage scales. Thus, when the expedition arrived in Macao, on January 3, 1787, La Pérouse landed the naturalist and chronicler of the voyage, Jean-Nicolas Dufresne (1747-1812), giving specific orders for his return to Paris and delivering to the Navy Minister all reports and cartography made since the departure from Brest. Later, in Kamchatka, a peninsula in Russia's Far East, La Pérouse ordered Jean-Baptiste-Barthélemy de Lesseps (1766-1834) to return to France by land with an identical mission. A final shipment of the expedition's relations, journals, maps, and research arrived in Europe through a British ship from Australia, the *Alexander*.²

In 1791, the French Navy Minister decided to promote the official publication of La Pérouse journals, which only finally appeared in 1797, gathering four volumes and an Atlas.³ The edition was made by Baron Louis Marie Antoine Destouff de Millet de Mureau (1756-1825), at the time a brigade general that would arrive, two years later, to the high position of Defense Minister. Many other editions followed, sometimes altering the text of this previous official publication up to the centenary of La Pérouse's death when the cartographer and archivist Gabriel Marcel (1843-1909) published again with rich historical and critic apparatus the volumes offered in 1797 by the governmental new Press of the Republic.⁴

La Pérouse left in these surviving parts of his voyage journal a fascinating memory of Macau that visits both the society and the institutions, reports trade and navigation, estimates the population figures, and critically evaluates the political situation of the enclave. He also describes fortresses in "awful conditions", the inner and out ports, the Portuguese system of governance, and wonders about commercial opportunities that he tried to accomplish without results when he tried to sell a considerable cargo of fur collected in North America. In Macau, La Pérouse also left an astronomical observatory set up in the convent of St. Augustine that later became an attraction in Camões Garden, especially relevant for the accurate measurement of the longitude of the city and the harbor of Taipa used by *la Boussole* and *l'Astrolabe*.

Almost ignored by historians is the astonishing panoramic view of Macau published in the 1797 official edition of La Pérouse voyage. The *Atlas* that luxuriously escorted the three narrative volumes offers 67 full-page engravings, 31 maps, 29 drawings of views, and 7 fauna species'

²Lesseps, Jean-Baptiste-Barthélemy de. 1790. *Journal historique du voyage de M. de Lesseps, consul de France, employé dans l'expédition de M. le comte de la Pérouse en qualité d'interprète du roi; depuis l'instant où il a quitté les frégates Françaises au port Saint-Pierre et Saint-Paul du Kamtschatka jusqu'à son arrivée en France le 17 octobre 1788*. Paris: Impr. Royale, 2 vols.; Vassal, Guy. 2006. *La Boussole, des confins de la Sibérie à Versailles avec le messager de Lapérouse (1787-1788)*. Paris: Éditions de Paris.

³La Pérouse, Jean-François Galaup de. 1797. *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde* (ed. L. A. Milet-Mureau). Paris: Imprimerie de la République, 4 vols. and Atlas.

⁴La Pérouse, Jean-François Galaup de. 1888. *Récit de son voyage, expédition envoyée à sa recherche, le capitaine Dillon, Dumont d'Urville, reliques de l'expédition* (ed. de Gabriel Marcel). Paris: Librairie illustrée.

sketches. In the collection of panoramic views, mainly from Brazil to the Philippines, an astonishing engraving stands out, entitled ‘View of Macau in China’ made by Gaspard Duché de Vanchy (1755-1788), the official painter of the expedition who, aged 29, also vanished in Vanikoro disaster. Educated in Vienna and praised for his portraits, Vanchy’s extraordinary sight of Macao made from the now lost Saint Francis Convent (where he painted the Italian *poverello* in the cloister wall) is a significant work of art as well as a remarkable historical document since it is the only known panorama of the city made from this spatial perspective.⁵ Engraves and paintings with Macao views were popular in the 19th century. Still, none preserved Vanchy’s singular perspective, rather opting for frontal representations of the “Praia Grande” or taking views from the Penha hill precisely in the space opposite to the St. Francis convent.

In the first plan of the observer’s integration, four Franciscan friars topically portrayed distribute sociability: three attend a lady that seems a Macanese with her traditional mantle, the “saraça”, covering her head; another seraphic priest welcomes an elegantly drawn Chinese figure. Two women who can represent nuns or novices sit on the slight lawn ground in front of graves flagstones. On the convent staircase, two Chinese seem to talk, while we glimpse another that leaves and some distant few figures in miniature. The panoramic view stresses the calm semicircular bay of Praia Grande. The city seems small, and the houses display the same white forms with impeccable red roofs. However, the observer can perceive the fortress of Saint John of the Monte, the top of the façade of the Jesuit temple of Madre de Deus, the church of Saint Dominique, the disappeared chapel of Our Lady of the Navigators on an exaggerated Penha hill. The small polygonal bastion of Saint Francis defends the access to the sandy shore of Praia Grande, contrasting with the two cannons left by the ground in the elegant belvedere created by the painter in front of the seraphic convent. A regular wall extends but then disappears, reappearing only far down the escarpment of Penha. One does not see the critical inner harbor and the restlessness of that much more populous and laborious “other” city of Macau built around the “Chinese bazaar”.

This elegant seaside façade of a city framed by the doff mountains of Lapa offers a stagy, almost lyrical, quiet locus: a true urban theater in the Renaissance tradition of Abraham Ortelius’ *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*. The European classical artistic mentality of representing the city through its utmost noble seaside or riverine façade stands. Cities must be seen and appreciated from the sea that brings foreigners. Surprisingly, Vanchy only painted topical Chinese vessels, junks, and small sampans in the magnificent bay, with no European trading ship on the horizon. Nothing disturbs the observer from imagining the singular façade of serene Macau. However, we do not know the conditions under which the original represen-

⁵La Pérouse, 1797: II, 315-333, IV, G. 40.

tation reached this 1797 *Atlas* edition. The two engravings that follow this view of Macao, dedicated to Manila, are almost portraits of persons exaggeratedly represented as practically Spanish, and of that other Iberian colonial city, nothing is indeed unveiled.

The engraver's intervention, Louis-Joseph Masquellier (1741-1811), who was also a very reputed designer and painter, was probably crucial in arranging the series of views. Originally printed in black and white, some *Atlas* copies were colored, from maps to views, now preserved in some few European libraries. Sent as usual for bookshops' trade, these different *Atlas* engravings constituted a significant source of prestige and, of course, significant gains for lithographers and publishers. An impressive historical unique representation of Macao in the 1780s, Vanchy engraving also is a classic work of art, an article for rich collections, namely in these copies that survived in colorful imagination.

One cannot avoid merging the image with La Pérouse's narrative on Macau. In fact, in the text passage that invites the readers to observe this engraving, the French navigator, through his editor, wrote only: "the aspect of the city is delightful (*Atlas*, No. 40). There are many beautiful houses leased to the foremen of the different companies that are forced to spend the winter in Macao". In this same narrative, few pages before, La Pérouse had also explained what he labeled as the general laziness felt throughout the Portuguese urban part of Macau, the area imagined in this panoramic view, explaining that the inhabitants were "mostly mulattos" Portuguese believing that it is a disgrace to devote themselves to any mechanical art and thus to make their families subsist; but their self-esteem does not revolt by constantly demanding, and with importunity, charity to passers-by."⁶

⁶La Pérouse, 1797: II, 324.



View of Macau in China [Vue de Macao en Chine], Atlas, G. 40.

References

- Dunmore, John. 1965. *French Explorers of the Pacific*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dunmore, John. 1985. *Pacific Explorer: The life of Jean-François de la Pérouse, 1741–1788*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.
- Kirk, Robert W. 2012. *Paradise Past: The Transformation of the South Pacific, 1520-1920*. Jefferson-London: McFarland & Company.
- La Pérouse, Jean-François Galaup de. 1797. *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde* (ed. L. A. Milet-Mureau). Paris: Imprimerie de la République, 4 vols. and Atlas.
- Lesseps, Jean-Baptiste-Barthélemy de. 1790. *Journal historique du voyage de M. de Lesseps, consul de France, employé dans l'expédition de M. le comte de la Pérouse en qualité d'interprète du roi; depuis l'instant où il a quitté les frégates Françaises au port Saint-*

- Pierre et Saint-Paul du Kamtschatka jusqu'à son arrivée en France le 17 octobre 1788.*
Paris: Impr. Royale, 2 vols.
- Marcel, Gabriel. 1888. *La Pérouse: récit de son voyage, expédition envoyée à sa recherche, le capitaine Dillon, Dumont d'Urville, reliques de l'expédition (Edition du centenaire).*
Paris: Librairie Illustré.
- Sousa, Ivo Carneiro de. 2014. *Descrições Históricas de Macau em Viajantes Franceses (1623-1900).* Macau: EWIAS Editor.
- Vassal, Guy. 2006. *La Boussole, des confins de la Sibérie à Versailles avec le messenger de Lapérouse (1787-1788).* Paris: Éditions de Paris
- West-Sooby, John (ed.). 2013. *Discovery and Empire the French in the South Seas.* Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.